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ABSTRACT

The word "service" certainly conjures some undesirable connotations, and theorists such as Nancy Grimm propose that writing centers need to shed their service labels to attain respectability. In this paper, the writing center director of a small liberal arts college shares her perspective and juxtaposes that with Grimm's position that writing centers should strive to become "academic units" rather than "service units" to attain academic respectability. The paper describes the students of Regis College (Colorado), the services they want from the writing center, the services that the writing center provides, and discusses how these conflict with Grimm's position on service. The paper begins with the results of a writing profile of Regis's freshmen which suggests that they are not marginalized students and that they are fairly confident writers who do not foresee the need for outside help with writing. It points out that a continual challenge at Regis is convincing students that all writers can benefit from a visit to the writing center. The paper states that most students really want proofreading and a good grade from a visit to the writing center rather than writing improvement. According to the paper, the trick is to ask questions to help the student discover problems and solutions for his or her writing. The paper concludes that since service is an integral part of the ideology informing the Regis community, the Regis Writing Center cannot protest that it is not service-oriented--it serves its community by identifying students' needs and providing assistance. (NKA)

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Serving the Community:

A Small, Liberal Arts College Writing Center

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Paper Presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication

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Serving the Community:

A Small, Liberal Arts College Writing Center

Service...servants...slaves. In service industries, workers flip hamburgers or tend a cash register or clean hotel rooms. The word "service" certainly conjures some undesirable connotations, and theorists such as Nancy Grimm propose that writing centers need to shed their service labels in order to attain respectability. What if, however, the writing center is situated in an institution whose motto is "Men and women in service of others"? What if the students request services such as proofreading? As the writing center director of a small, liberal a:ts school, I would like to share my perspective and juxtapose that with Grimm's position that writing centers should strive to become "academic units" rather than "service units" in order to attain academic respectability.[1] I will describe the students of Regis College, the services that they want from the writing center, the services that the writing center provides, and I will discuss how these conflict with Grimm's position on service.

Let's begin with the students of Regis College. They are confident about their writing. In the first few weeks of fall semester, freshmen complete the Cooperative Institutional Research Project (CIRP), and the results that pertain to the writing center are as follows:

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[1]Nancy Maloney Grimm, "Rearticulating the Work of a Writing Center," *CCC* 47.4 (December 1996): 534.

Cooperative Institutional Research Project (CIRP)

Fall 2000 (299 Students)

Statement	%
English is native language	95.3
White/Caucasian	88.5
U.S. citizen	96.3
Age 18-19 years old	95.6
Average grade of A in high school	41.2
Average grade of B in high school	49.7
One to four AP courses taken in high school	48.0
Writing ability self-rated in top 10% compared to peers	46.0
Tutoring or remedial help for writing needed in the past	10.7
Tutoring or remedial help for writing may be needed in college	20.4

This profile suggests that Regis freshmen are not marginalized students and that they are fairly confident writers who do not foresee the need for outside help with writing. Likewise, Wendy Bishop reported in 1990 that 38% of the students at the University of Alaska Fairbanks hadn't visited the writing center because they "didn't need to" (p. 35).[2] A continual challenge at Regis is convincing students that all writers benefit from a visit to the writing center.

This confidence of freshman writers that is evident in the CIRP study is also demonstrated in their evaluations of Freshman Seminar, which is the writing-intensive course that all freshmen

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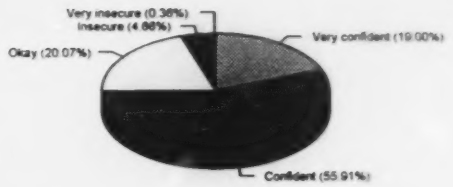
[2]Wendy Bishop, "Bringing Writers to the Center: Some Survey Results, Surmises, and Suggestions," *Writing Center Journal* 10.2 (Spring-Summer 1990): 35.

must take in their first semester. The course evaluation is performed at the end of the semester, and the self-reported results concerning writing ability for fall 2000 are as follows:

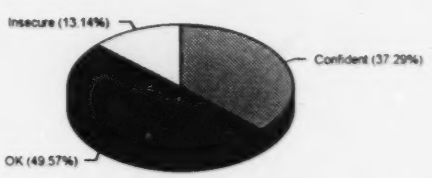
Freshman Seminar Evaluations, F00
Writing Ability (279 Total)



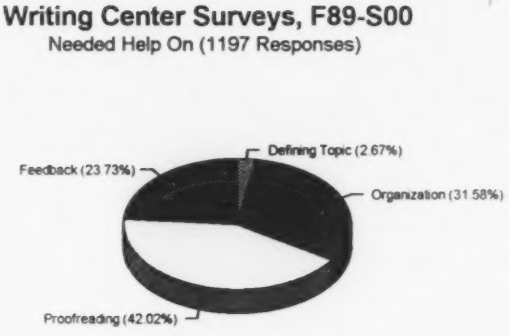
Comparing this to the CIRP study, we see that by the end of fall semester, 75% of the freshmen feel confident about their writing compared to 46% at the beginning of the semester.

If the students are this confident, who comes to the writing center, and what type of help do they want? The answers are found in the writing center's random surveys filled out by approximately 50 students each semester:

Writing Center Surveys, F89-S00
Writing Ability (700 Responses)



Students who visit the writing center are somewhat less confident than the freshmen, but 87% of them feel at least okay about their writing.



Looking at the type of help these students want, we see that two are dominant: proofreading and organization. Because proofreading is connected with the service image of writing centers, this will be my focus.

Given the confidence of the Regis writers, it is perhaps not surprising that most students who come to the writing center want proofreading. Obviously, however, there is another factor besides their confidence: They want good grades. This motivation is described by Stephen North, who found that students at the University of Albany were more interested in getting a good grade on a particular piece of writing than in achieving long-term improvement.[3] I suspect that Regis students feel the same.

Whether it's their desire for a better grade or because of their confidence, Regis students clearly want proofreading, so we don't turn them away with the curt response that "we don't do that." Instead, we look at this as an opportunity to teach grammar in the context of the student's writing, rather than through workbooks or exercises. With the student at his or her side, the

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[3]Stephen North, "Revisiting 'The Idea of a Writing Center,'" *The Writing Center Journal* 15.1 (Fall 1994): 10.

consultant explains punctuation, pronouns, and passive voice, and checks MLA and APA documentation. We do not allow students to drop off their papers and pick up a corrected version an hour later; we always work personally with students.

Yet, proofreading, which is closely connected with the image of writing centers as services, often is not enough help. From anecdotal comments of faculty and from my twelve years working in the writing center, I know that students' writing often needs more than merely correcting surface errors. Thus, while we offer proofreading, our main focus in every session is effective communication. After all, a perfectly punctuated paper that is devoid of ideas is no prize, so consultants first make sure that a piece of writing makes sense: Does it have an effective thesis? Does an argument have reasons and acknowledge the opposing view? Is the proper audience addressed? Is there a topic sentence for paragraphs, and are paragraphs used where the reader expects them? These may well be conventions from the Western, hegemonic culture, but remember that Regis students belong to this culture. So, while Regis students only want proofreading, we also give them a reader's feedback.

What problems arise with offering proofreading as a service? First, we must always be aware of the fine line described by Molly Wingate that separates our work from the student's.[4] As much as the term "collaborative learning" is bandied about, faculty want to see the work of the student, not the consultant. We ask questions to help the student discover problems and solutions, but we sit on our hands and bite our tongues when we see a great way to improve the paper that the student does not see. Second, we make sure that we are teaching, even though

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[4]Molly Wingate, "What Line? I Didn't See Any Line," *A Tutor's Guide: Helping Writers One to One*, ed. Ben Rafoth (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 2000) 9-16.

peer tutoring handbooks specifically warn that writing consultants should not be surrogate teachers. Again, mere proofreading reflects only the consultant's expertise while teaching mechanics and usage improves the writer's ability to apply conventions in their future writing. Third, we must avoid the fix-it-shop image of writing centers. Obviously, given the confidence that Regis students have in their writing, they don't want to be considered broken writers who need remedial services, and neither does the writing center want to be considered a repair shop rather than a community of writers. Fourth, no writing consultant can catch every error and assume the mantle of a writing expert, a "Grammar God," as Beth Rapp Young characterizes this aura of infallibility.[5] Our writing consultants are peer readers, not experts, but they are more versed in and intrigued by the intricacies of language than most students.

Let me now return to the problem I posed at the beginning: Does offering proofreading place the Regis Writing Center in Grimm's "subordinate service position"?[6] My answer is a qualified "yes." Even though proofreading is associated with the type of drudge work that servants perform, I believe it is an integral part of writing. I believe, as does Grimm, that students must learn to edit and proofread because, without those skills, they are perceived as less literate, a finding that Maxine Hairston reported in the 1980s.[7] I go even further than Grimm, however, because I also believe that proofreading your own work is nearly impossible to do effectively, so writing centers should offer this assistance. As Joan Hawthorne of the University of North

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[5]Beth Rapp Young, "Can You Proofread This?," *A Tutor's Guide: Helping Writers One to One*, ed. Ben Rafoth (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 2000) 111-18.

[6]Grimm, "Rearticulating," 524.

[7]Maxine Hairston, "Not All Errors Are Created Equal: Nonacademic Readers in the Professions Respond to Lapses in Usage," *College English* 43.8 (December 1981): 794.

Dakota states, writing centers that focus on students' needs must offer a variety of services, including proofreading if that is what the students need.[8] Writing centers may risk their scholarly reputation by offering proofreading as a service, but minimizing surface errors is an essential part of writing.

The larger question, of course, is whether writing centers should be viewed as services rather than as scholarly, academic units. The danger of being labeled a service is lack of respect. One posting on the Wcenter listserve described writing centers as the "footstools of academia,"[9] and Neal Lerner states that writing center directors are often viewed as administrators, not as teachers or scholars.[10] In the academic hierarchy, neither a footstool nor an administrator garners much respect.

This theoretical opposition to service presents a quandary for me, however, because service is integral to Regis. The school's motto is "Men and women in service to others," and this commitment to service is not merely idealistic rhetoric. In his inaugural address in 1993, Regis President Michael Sheeran, S.J., charged not only students to serve but also the faculty and staff to serve one another. The president carries out this vision of service at his monthly birthday celebrations for faculty and staff: The president serves cake and beverages and will not allow his guests to get their own refreshments. Likewise, every spring the faculty host a barbeque for the staff, making all arrangements, cooking the food, and serving drinks. These two examples of

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[8]Joan Hawthorne, "'We don't proofread here': Re-visioning the writing center to better meet student needs," *The Writing Lab Newsletter* 23.8 (April 1999): 6.

[9]Karen Clark, "Query about title of Director," Wcenter listserve (2/22/01).

[10]Neal Lerner, "Confessions of a First-Time Writing Center Director," *The Writing Center Journal* 21.1 (Fall/Winter 2000): 31.

service are perhaps symbolic, but they are also an effective yet subtle reminder of the school's motto. Regis' spirit of service is more overt in areas such as the service learning component of courses, or in the requirement that students perform volunteer service in order to be accepted into the honor society, or in the annual faculty/staff awards for service that are presented by the university. Thus, service is an integral part of the ideology informing the Regis community. From the president to the faculty to the students, service is expected at Regis. Given this institutionally-promoted philosophy of service to others, the Regis Writing Center cannot protest that it is not service-oriented. Rather, its primary question must be, "How can we serve?"

Grimm acknowledges that writing centers are "located within institutions and financed by institutions[11]...[and that] knowledge of how the system works, what the system expects, must be tempered by what writing centers learn about who students are."[12] I believe that the Regis Writing Center is informed about who the students are and what the institution expects. This knowledge is possible because Regis College is a small division of Regis University: While over 12,000 students attend the university, Regis College has only 1,200 students, and these college students are the primary focus of the writing center. Because of its small size, the college faculty, staff, and students actually know each other: We are a community.

Thus, the Regis Writing Center serves its community by identifying students' needs and providing assistance. The students want proofreading, so we provide that service along with examining more important rhetorical concepts. The individuality–and idiosyncracy–of writing centers across the nation is well known: Writing centers are not fungible. Nonetheless, one

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[11]Grimm, "Rearticulating," 541.

[12]Grimm, "Rearticulating," 534-35.

would think that the negative concept of service would be held in common by all writing center directors. After all, no one aspires to be the footstool of academia. However, avoiding the service image is not possible at a campus such as Regis because, if the president is willing to serve, how can I protest that the writing center will not?

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